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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Populism in Journalistic Photographs: Political Leaders in Venezuelan Newspaper Images

Virpi Salojärvi

Former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez was renowned for his media skills and public appearances. In this study, his visual media representations are compared to those of other politicians in a framework of populism. The data includes articles by two Venezuelan newspapers representing opposing political views, and is analysed using content analysis and visual rhetorical interpretation. The focus is on the ways in which the sense of belonging, including its affective aspects, are visually constructed in journalistic photographs. It was found that, as a signifier, Chávez was constructed using many different techniques in the government-leaning newspaper. In this way, the image of Chávez was constructed by depicting him as someone special and authentic, distinct from other politicians, powerful yet at one with the people at the same time, and both evincing and generating emotion. The anti-Chávez newspaper, on the other hand, depicted the opposition leader in a more traditional and less emotional way, and despite an arranged photo opportunity, the newspaper was able to put its own slant on the Chavista politicians. The article contributes to the scarce literature of visual aspects of Venezuelan politics under Chávez's presidency, and understudied affective and performative dimensions of populism.

Keywords: populism; signifiers; antagonism; journalistic photographs; political leaders; Venezuela

Introduction

During President Hugo Chávez's era (1999–2013), the 'Chavismo' movement and its front man employed antagonistic discourse that divided the population between supporters and opposers of the government, and appealed to the people (e.g. Brading 2013; Salojärvi 2016). Moreover, to emphasize this populist discourse, Chávez had a media-based government, where policy and decision-making were performed live on TV (Cañizález 2012: 62). In this sense, Chávez used the media not only to declare his politics and to mobilize supporters, but also to broaden his charismatic and populist appeal (cf. Mazzoleni 2008), of which visual representations formed an important part.

The context of Venezuela under Chávez emerges as an ideal case study for the purpose of focusing on populist characteristics found in media texts. In this respect, Chávez shares some characteristics with other Latin American populist leaders. Both Chávez and Argentina's Juan Perón were charismatic, had a penchant for confronting American imperialism, had a military background, and came from middle-class families (Arenas 2006: 40–41). Chávez also inspired a group of Latin American radical populists, such as Rafael Correa in Ecuador and Evo Morales in Bolivia (de la Torre 2017). Hence, by focusing

on Venezuela under Chávez, we can also learn about other Latin American populist movements, especially those that expand the Manichean divide from politics to social cleavages and use mass gatherings and mobilization in a similar way (de la Torre 2017).

In a similar fashion to his populist predecessors in the region (de la Torre 2017), Chávez mastered the media in many ways, so it may be assumed that he and his team developed an ability to construct his visual image as well, especially when the government aimed to gain increasing control over the media during Chávez's presidency (Bisbal 2009). Indeed, much of the previous research has focused on Chávez himself including his rhetoric (e.g. Valecillos Vázquez 2014) and media strategies (e.g. Frajman 2014). Yet, as is argued in this article a broader political and media context should be taken into account when analysing Venezuela during Chávez's presidency since Chávez's media image was constructed in relation to other political and media actors. In addition, communication aspects of populism in general are underexplored, and when they are studied, the focus is often on the right-wing populism and verbal communication, ignoring the diversity of populist actors (Aalberg and al. 2016; see also Sengul 2019) and visual communication (see however Casullo 2018; Hyttinen and Näre 2017; Wodak and Forchtner 2014).

Even though populism is a disputed concept, there is a growing consensus among scholars that some of the characteristics of populism include a Manichean distinction between 'the people' and 'the elite', both of which may

be defined in numerous ways (e.g. Hawkins 2010; Laclau 2005a; Mudde 2017). A facet of this antagonism between the supporters of a populist movement – often portrayed as ‘the people’, and ‘the other’ – namely the economic or political elite or some out-group, is one of the focal points of this study, especially in the form of constructing the sense of ‘us’ through signifiers (Laclau 2005a). Such signifiers are needed since populism arises in a heterogeneous society and in order to harmonize the situation, populist symbols are required to create stability and a feeling of unity. They have been studied previously in the context of written media texts (Herkman 2017; Salojärvi 2018), but in this article, the construction of these signifiers is studied in the context of newspaper photographs focusing on the understudied affective, communicative, and performative dimensions (Sengul 2019) and also understanding the construction of signifiers as a process. To this end, the research question that will be addressed is: *in what ways are populist elements visually constructed and challenged in journalistic photographs?*

In the first part of the article, I present the concepts relevant to the study, especially the notion of antagonism and the formation of signifiers. This will be followed by a discussion of visual representations in politics. In the empirical part of the article, I introduce a comparative case study where I focus on newspaper coverage by two Venezuelan newspapers representing extreme, opposing political views: the government-leaning and government-funded *Correo del Orinoco*, and the private, anti-Chávez *Tal Cual*. The articles from December 2010 deal with the case of an enabling law designed to allow Chávez to enact decrees directly without the National Assembly’s approval, in order to help citizens impacted by heavy rains and flooding. This case study was selected because the case involves newspaper articles concentrating on ‘the people’, and the government’s efforts to safeguard their wellbeing. In this way, the articles also construct the idea of Venezuelans and the politicians representing them, which aligns well with the analysis of forming the ‘us’.

I will firstly analyse the journalistic photographs of *Correo del Orinoco* through the lens of political endeavour. By way of comparison, I will then examine *Tal Cual*, which presents an opposing political viewpoint. The images are firstly analysed using content analysis, after which four of them are selected for visual rhetorical interpretation (Kędra and Sommer 2018). After presenting the findings, I will discuss populist elements, namely creating the sense of ‘us’ through signifiers. Based on the results of the analysis, I will conclude by arguing that visual representations in print media perform the function of transmitting and enforcing a populist message—especially in the case of a populist leader as a signifier. As the findings will show, as a signifier, Chávez was constructed using many different techniques. When compared with different Venezuelan political leaders, Chávez’s visual representation was constructed by depicting him as someone special and by creating a perception of authenticity, portraying him as distinct from others, powerful but nonetheless close to the people and connecting with them emotionally at the same time. The anti-Chávez newspaper, on the

other hand, presents the opposition leader in a more traditional and less emotional light, and despite an arranged photo opportunity, the newspaper is able to put its own slant on the Chavista politicians.

Antagonism and signifiers in the Venezuelan context

In populism, the underdogs of society – the lower socio-economic classes with racial connotations in the case of Venezuela (Ellner 2008) – become heard and noticed, and they also become a politically significant group. It is important to note that the notion of ‘the people’ within populism does not denote the whole population even though it desires to be thought of as the only legitimate totality (Laclau 2005a: 81). The people desire to feel that they are part of a unity, and in order to strengthen this sentiment, the population needs to be divided into two groups – ‘us’ and ‘them’. This antagonism serves two purposes: populists are able to fashion their requisite enemy, and the antagonism also helps to construct an identity among the people (Taggart 2000: 94). Political meaning-making is closely connected to affective ties in Laclau’s theory (Palonen 2018) and here following Butler (Butler and al. 2000) it should be emphasized that it is the performative character of meaning-making what makes it constitutive. It is about not only speech or writing but, as in photographs, it is performed in time and space (Palonen 2018).

In his rhetoric, Chávez often used the words ‘the people’ (*el pueblo*) and ‘sovereign’ (*el soberano*) synonymously, which had different kinds of connotations among different parts of the population. For the upper-middle and upper classes and many intellectuals, namely the assumed readers of *Tal Cual*, this discourse created discord and animosity, highlighting the division between rich and poor that poses a threat to democratic stability, and which impinges on their own personal security and prosperity. For popular sectors, however, Chávez’s symbolically integrative discourse of recognizing these divisions between Venezuelans and appealing to the majority (the people, sovereign) generated a sense of belonging (Lander 2005: 33). Thus, there is an underlining affective investment in this construction of us/them dichotomy (Laclau 2005). This study duly demonstrates how this sense of belonging, including its affective aspects, was achieved visually in journalistic photographs.

In Venezuela, the us/them dichotomy is, thus, a division between the ‘Chavistas’ and the opposition. The ‘people’ of Chavismo formed part of the population that were working together for the ‘Bolivarian revolution’. The ‘other’ of Chavismo comprised the opposition, which consisted of rich ‘bourgeois’ and ‘oligarchic’ parties, and others who may have been involved in the attempted coup against Chávez in 2002, coupled with ‘imperialist powers’ that carried connotations of the country’s elitist, clientelist and corrupt politics from the era before Chávez (Ellner 2008; Salojärvi 2016).

One of the preconditions of populism is a formation of chains consisting of unfulfilled demands that prevail in the population, partly due to the marginalization of a part

of that population in politics. The equivalential relation of the demands subsequently develops beyond the feeling of vague solidarity and a sound system of signification is constructed (Laclau 2005a: 74). When one signifier rises to nominate the equivalential chains of demands, and as the equivalential chains get longer and longer, the signifier ends up being more and more imprecise. This happens because this 'empty signifier's' connection to the specific, original demands weakens (Laclau 2005b: 39–40.). Hence, these signifiers harmonize a highly heterogeneous situation. This can reach the stage whereby the harmonizing function is crystallized into a pure name, and in this way the name (and the persona) of the leader becomes a strong symbol for populism (Laclau 2005b: 40) as in the case of Chavismo and Chávez.

However, the equivalential chain may confront rival equivalential chains that interlink with some of the demands of the original chain. In this way, the independent popular signifier, which differs from the original one, is produced. These suspended signifiers are called 'floating signifiers' (Laclau 2005a: 131). However, in reality, the concepts of empty and floating signifier are useful as an analytical tool and they overlap with each other (Laclau 2005b: 43). That is why in this article the term 'signifier' alone is sometimes used.

Visual representations in politics

Newspaper photographs affect voters' beliefs regarding politicians' personal traits, and the voters' general impression of politicians, and as a result images also affect the voters' decision about whether or not to vote for a particular politician (Barrett and Barrington 2005a). Moreover, a newspaper reader is not affected by just one picture, since newspapers tend to publish a series of favourable or unfavourable images of their preferred politicians (Barrett and Barrington 2005b). This reinforces the impression that their readers have or are being given of these politicians. The journal *Correo del Orinoco* is a government-funded newspaper that might, as a result of its funding, conform most closely to the government viewpoint. *Tal Cual* is an openly biased, anti-Chávez newspaper that represents the opposite viewpoint. Hence, the newspapers are directed at almost opposing audiences, and therefore it can be assumed that they contain different kinds of representations of Venezuelan politicians.

There are many different ways to change the perceived image of a politician in photographs. For example, an active subject is often perceived as more powerful compared to a static one (Mandell and Shaw 1973). Other ways of altering an image in favour of a politician are, for example, by selecting or emphasizing particular backgrounds, expressions and clothing (Rosenberg, Kahn and Tran 1991). When politicians gain more power, they are also able to control the number of photo opportunities and who gets to participate in them (e.g. Mendelson 2018; Salojärvi 2016). This is highlighted in populism because populists tend to divide the media into supporters and opponents of the populist movement (Waisbord 2011) as antagonism penetrates different sectors of society. Attending arranged photo opportunities arguably also

affects the final visual outcome since the photographs are taken from a designated area, which affects the angle of the photograph, for example.

The angle matters because the represented participant can address the viewer with her/his body language. A frontal angle speaks to the viewer, while an oblique angle underlines detachment between the photographed and the scene/viewer (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 124, 143). Moreover, at a low angle, the represented participant is perceived as having more power than the interactive participant, while the converse is true of a high angle. Similarly, eye level is perceived as denoting equal power relations between participants (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 146).

It is said that populists are particularly media-conscious and media-savvy because they want direct interaction with their audiences (Weyland 2001: 14). Hence, media professionals become important and might even perform functions that were previously performed by mass party organizations (Roberts 2006: 136). Populist leaders may plan their slogans and rhetoric with public relations (PR) professionals (e.g. Ahola-Laurila 2015) or even base their career on reality television and social media (e.g. Boczkowski and Papacharissi 2018). For example, in the case of Chávez, he may have had the final say but the media professionals had a role in steering him in the desired directions (Frajman 2014). Yet the power of media outlets should not be undermined since the images go through an editorial process. Hence, the media have an active role in creating the public image of a politician and in forming a populist message (cf. Kunelius, Noppari and Reunanen 2010). A picture taken at the right time may present a politician as a crooked betrayer or an honoured head of state (cf. Mendelson 2018). In this sense, the final outcome is a result of interplay between the politician (and political institutions) and the media.

The case study, data and methods

The case study involves the case of the aforementioned enabling law. The chain of events leading up to the latter started in December 2010 when Chávez asked the National Assembly to pass a law that would allow him to make decisions without the Assembly's approval, in order to fast-track the aid process for people who were suffering as a result of the heavy rains. This move happened during the second half of Chávez's presidency when the power was concentrated more in the hands of the president (López Maya 2011: 236), and the media were divided along antagonistic lines between the government-supporting media and the so-called opposition media (Salojärvi 2016). The law was rapidly passed and lasted for one year. The opposition accused the Assembly of annulling the forthcoming new Assembly, which was about to start its term in January 2011. In this new Assembly, the governing parties did not have a two-thirds majority, which is often required for decision-making.

The argument continued well into January 2011 but even in one week, between December 11 and 17 2010, there were 35 newspaper articles dealing with the case in *Correo del Orinoco* and 29 articles in *Tal Cual*. Several

articles where the case was just mentioned by name were excluded. The *Correo del Orinoco* articles included 61 photographs. The images were firstly analysed using content analysis, and after identifying common characteristics in this way, the most representative pictures in terms of actors, activeness and cropping were chosen for visual analysis. A similar process was performed when analysing the 14 photographs included in the *Tal Cual* articles.

Visual rhetorical interpretation was employed as a qualitative method, which is specifically designed to 'reveal particular rhetorical strategies instead of enumerating and describing what the picture shows' (Kędra and Sommier 2018). The method consists of questions based on particular visual methods, which comprise visual rhetoric (Foss 2005; Wright 2011), denotations and connotations (Barthes 1961/1983; Barthes 1964/1977), compositional interpretation (Rose 2012) and intertextuality (Allen 2000; Kristeva 1980). However, the original questions designed by Kędra and Sommier (2018) were modified in order to specifically target the research question (Table 1). The method was first applied to the specific photographs presented in this article, and the results were subsequently evaluated in relation to all of the images of Chávez and other politicians in the data in order to confirm their reliability.

Images are an essential part of storytelling in the news. They may crystallize the message conveyed in the text, bring something new to the subject, be used to bring entertainment value to the narrative, or awaken interest in reading the story. Readers see the photographs as representing the story and as conveying a visual identity for them (Wright 2011). Specifically, one of the roles played by images is their ability to interact with the text and duly make particular parts of it more salient (Schmuck and Matthes 2017).

Findings

Content analysis

Content analysis was mainly used to identify suitable examples for the visual rhetorical interpretation. In this way, content and visual analysis were used to complement each other (cf. Rose 2012). The subjects of the content analysis were the quantity of articles and images, the perspective of the articles, the principal actor in the text, the size of

the article, section of the article, and the cropping, principal actors and their activeness in the images. In the case of *Correo del Orinoco*'s 35 articles, there were 21 complete articles with photographs, and a headline with a short inset including one or more pictures on the cover on six out of the seven days studied. The substantial coverage and images clearly reveal that the newspaper considered the case important. Of all the actors, Chávez was the third most present in the photographs (18 per cent, see Table 2), and 16 per cent of the articles featured him as the principal actor in the texts.

The perspective of the articles in *Correo del Orinoco* varied somewhat and the perspective on the cover was not always repeated in the actual article. The dominant perspectives were 1) a politician or people explaining why the law was needed and supporting it or ensuring that the content of the law would be sufficient (52 per cent); 2) Chávez taking action for the wellbeing of the people (12 per cent); and 3) the content of the law (12 per cent). There was only one article criticizing the law. Hence, the newspaper devoted a great deal of space to explaining why the law was needed and its content. Other Chavismo politicians were presented as taking care of setting the law and justifying it, while Chávez was already in the field taking action and confronting the refugees.

In the case of *Tal Cual*, only 14 articles out of 29 included a photograph. Hence, the two datasets were somewhat uneven, but nevertheless this did not affect the overall analysis because the content analysis was used to describe the data and to identify suitable photographs for the visual analysis, in addition to the criteria of finding suitable pairs for the comparison. The perspective in the articles varied considerably. The most prevalent were 1) arguing that there was another reason for the law besides the rains (22 per cent); 2) democracy and dictatorship (17 per cent); 3) the Assembly handling the case (13 per cent); and 4) someone (usually the opposition) criticizing the law (13 per cent), which is the only category among the perspectives that both newspapers had in common. This mismatch among the perspectives demonstrates the completely opposite extremes adopted by the newspapers. *Tal Cual*'s perspectives reveal a lack of confidence in the politicians at that time. There were no stories about the heavy rains and the victims since it appeared

Table 1: Visual rhetorical interpretation questions.

| | |
|--|---|
| 1 Basic denotation | What does the photograph show? What kind of story does it present? |
| 2 Analysis of photographic techniques and atmosphere | How do framing, lighting, composition, colour and its saturation help in constructing the in-group cohesion, the sense of 'us' opposed to 'them', of the populist movement? |
| 3 Visual rhetorical figures | What kind of visual rhetorical figures can be identified in the photograph? What are their roles in constructing the in-group cohesion among the populist movement? |
| 4 Symbol and intertextuality | Which other texts does the photograph refer to? Which symbols does it depict? Can they be identified as signifiers, knowing the context? |
| 5 Emotional engagement | What kind of emotional engagement with the story does the photograph portray? How is the in-group cohesion emotionally constructed in the photograph? |
| 6 The visual argument | What argument is conveyed through the photograph? |

that *Tal Cual* did not connect the enabling law to the damage but was looking instead for ulterior motives for Chávez's introduction of the law. The case appeared on the cover on five days out of the six that the newspaper was published.

Visual analysis

For the visual rhetorical interpretation, I chose *Correo del Orinoco*'s cover for the December 15 issue (see **Figure 1**, photos: Montes/Agencia Venezolana de Noticias and Presidential Press) because based on the content analysis it represented a typical editorial choice by the newspaper; the photo of Chávez presents him as active, other politicians as passive, and it is cropped in such a way that the other people with Chávez are shown.

Table 2: Actors in the photographs.

| Principal actor | <i>Correo del Orinoco</i> | <i>Tal Cual</i> |
|------------------------|---------------------------|------------------|
| 'Chavista' politicians | 31% (19) | 36% (5) |
| Chávez | 18% (11) | 7% (1) |
| Citizens | 30% (18) | 7% (1) |
| Opposition politician | 2% (1) | 29% (4) |
| Expert | – | 14% (2) |
| Other | 5% (3) | – |
| No actors | 15% (9) | 7% (1) |
| TOTAL | 100% (61) | 100% (14) |

On the cover, the main news story is headlined 'Economic Impact of the Crisis Caused by the Rains Rises to 10,000 Million Dollars – National Assembly Will Approve the Enabling Law Tomorrow'. Next to the headline there is a small picture of two Chavista politicians, the Speaker of the National Assembly Cilia Flores and the Vice President Elias Jaua. Metaphorically, Flores has her hand on an official folder of the state of Venezuela as if to indicate that the Assembly – namely the democratically elected representatives of the people and herself as the Speaker – are in charge of the decision-making, and the deputies are the ones having the final word in this case. Jaua is wearing a red and pink tie. Red is the colour that symbolizes socialism and Chavismo, but combined with pink stripes, it creates a softer image.

A completely different kind of picture appears underneath, however, depicting President Chávez in the middle of a crowd. With him is the President of Ecuador, Rafael Correa. Correa is positioned in the centre of the photograph and his presence underlines Chávez's importance and the urgency of the issue: the situation was so dire that a president from another country came to witness the crisis and to show 'solidarity' (as the subheading indicates).

The selected images of the politicians and Chávez are telling because, in the data, when politicians were photographed with citizens or fellow politicians there was usually not much interaction between them. They were either standing passively or listening, which does not evoke an emotional engagement or convey a powerful image. The difference in the case of President Chávez is striking; he



Figure 1: Section of the cover of *Correo del Orinoco*, December 15, 2010.

Source: *Correo del Orinoco*, Edición impresa.¹

almost always appeared with other people, either with politicians or ordinary citizens, always interacting, talking, touching, actively listening and demonstrating this with his body language, as shown in **Figure 1**.

The crowd with Chávez in the picture serves as a rhetorical figure that has the function of showing Chávez as a leader who is at the same level as common citizens, and who represents Venezuelans from different social classes (that is, including the lower socio-economic classes that were marginalized in Venezuelan society during the time of the Fourth Republic before Chávez's presidency). The people in the picture represent different ages, racial features and genders. This emphasizes the fact that he represents 'the people' of Venezuela. Indeed, to highlight the idea that he is not an elitist leader but just like them, Chávez is in the middle of the crowd. As has been argued, Chávez identified himself not only with the people but specifically with 'the excluded, the downtrodden, and the poor' (Zúquete 2008: 98–101), and he often pointed out that 'he was not important, merely an instrument of the people' (Frajman 2014: 511). This picture demonstrates that Chávez had become one with the people that were pushed to the margins of society, symbolizing them yet still remaining above them.

The camera angle of this picture is somewhat unusual since it was taken from above the people, highlighting the large crowd. Hence, the power relation is constructed by means other than a low angle (cf. Mandell and Shaw 1973); Chávez is still conveying a powerful image since he is looking down and leaning down towards the people. However, there is an additional emphasis on Chávez as 'one of the people' rather than being dislocated from them by his power, in the way that a low angle tends to isolate a figure from the viewer by suggesting height and how the figure is 'above' others. Chávez's dominance is also highlighted because he is undeniably the centre of attention in the picture. In addition, his power is shown by the size of the crowd; he is important and powerful enough to be surrounded by people eager to catch even a glimpse of him.

The page is constructed in such a way that Chávez himself does not seem to be taking part in the political decision-making that surrounded the enabling law per se. He simply asked the National Assembly for their permission to help his country without delay. It seems to be the Assembly's job and responsibility to deal with the legality of the issue. Chávez is already there in the field, active and getting his hands dirty. Thus, the perspectives of the texts are underlined in the visual images (cf. Schmuck and Matthes 2017).

There are also many other signifiers besides Chávez and the people in the picture. Chávez's military uniform underlines his army background; he is a man of orders, discipline and authority, but the army is also where his revolution started, which serves as a constant reminder that he originally came from outside the political scene. The colour red is always represented in Chávez's clothing, as here in the beret. Red symbolizes socialism in general, but in the Venezuelan context it specifically

denotes Chávez's 21st-century socialism and the Bolivarian revolution.

Tal Cual actually features a picture from the same event reported by *Correo del Orinoco*, the encounter between Flores and Jaua, in an article titled 'National Assembly Gives the Government Carte Blanche' (see **Figure 2**, photo: Otto). A comparison between the two seemingly similar images of the two politicians shows how the editorial staff can use minor details to change the focus entirely. In the *Tal Cual* picture, Flores' hand is not placed on top of the folder, so it does not become the centre of attention and does not make the same kind of rhetorical point as in the previous picture. The two politicians seem more passive in this photograph, as if visually articulating that passing the law was an order issued by a higher level.

The second picture chosen from *Tal Cual* for the purposes of comparison is a photograph accompanying the article '[States of] Lara and Miranda Oppose the Enabling Law' (see **Figure 3**, photo: Otto). It was chosen because images showing opposition politicians were common in *Tal Cual* (**Table 2**), and it aligns well with the picture of Chávez in *Correo del Orinoco*. In this sense, it is possible to draw a comparison between the visual representation of Chávez as a leader of Chavismo and the governor of Miranda, Henrique Capriles Radonski, one of the leaders of the Venezuelan opposition. The structure of both articles is similar. A head of state (president or governor) comes to visit an impacted area and to offer help. In the picture in *Tal Cual*, Capriles is more active than the governor of Lara, Henri Falcon. The man behind them appears to be listening to Capriles since he is looking at him intently. This emphasizes the importance of Capriles' message. Both governors are dressed casually. They are not wearing anything that would be associated with elitism, which is something that Chávez accused the opposition of. Capriles is even sporting stubble and a baseball cap. There is no red but a lot of blue instead, which is associated with the opposition.

Forming unity

The central concepts in this study are populist elements and how they may be used to enforce the sentiment of belonging. First, antagonism can be made visible in two ways, either by focusing on 'them' – the elite or the enemy – or as in this article by focusing more on constructing the sense of 'us', forming unity among 'the people'. Second, in populism, the feeling of unity among the people is created with signifiers. For Chávez's voters, specifically, as a rhetorical figure, the varied crowd shown in **Figure 1** symbolizes the fact that different kinds of people, including the underdogs in society (Laclau 2005a), lean towards their leader and together constitute the people of the Bolivarian nation. In this sense, different Chavismo supporters may feel a sense of belonging; they form 'the people', *el pueblo*. The strongest empty signifier in the pictures is, of course, Chávez himself. He is represented as being different from other politicians, as an active figure, which tends to evoke the perception that he has more power (cf. Mandell and Shaw 1973). The way

JAJA ASEGURÓ QUE EN 15 DÍAS COMENZARÁN A EMITIR DECRETOS LEYES

AN da carta blanca al Gobierno Nacional

♦ El proyecto de Ley Habilitante entró al Parlamento con una temporalidad de 12 meses

♦ El Ejecutivo podrá legislar en 9 ámbitos, entre los que se incluyen seguridad y defensa

DAYIMAR AYALA ALTUVE

Por un periodo de 12 meses el presidente Hugo Chávez podrá legislar mediante una ley Habilitante, tal como lo anunciara el viernes pasado. Ayer en la Asamblea Nacional, el Vicepresidente Ejecutivo Elias Jaua entregó el proyecto de Ley que fue recibido por Cilia Flores, presidenta del Parlamento.

El Gobierno pretende atacar 9 puntos, amparándose bajo el esquema de las emergencias por las lluvias. El proyecto reza que el Ejecutivo Nacional enmarcará su cuarta Habilitante en la atención a los afectados por las lluvias, infraestructura, transporte, servicios públicos, ordenación territorial, desarrollo integral, uso de la tierra rural y urbana, sistema financiero y tributario, seguridad ciudadana y jurídica, seguridad y defensa integral, cooperación internacional y todo el sistema socioeconómico de la nación.

"Dentro de los próximos 15 días empezaremos a emitir decretos leyes para responder a las emergencias", así lo señaló Elias Jaua, aunque no pudo determinar el número de textos jurídicos que se podrían emitir durante la temporalidad de la habilitante. Asimismo, destacó que el lapso de 12 meses que solicitó el Presidente se debe a las profundas medidas que se deben tomar para subsanar la crisis que dejaron los desastres naturales.

CILIA DUO AMÉN

La presidenta de la AN recibió de manos de Jaua el proyecto y anunció que el Parlamento se declaró a partir de ayer en sesión permanente. Cabe destacar que el periodo legislativo establecido para las sesiones extraordinarias vence hoy y a partir de mañana comenzarán las sesiones extraordinarias para cumplir con la agenda legislativa que exigen desde instancias superiores.

La primera discusión de la Habilitante comenzó ayer con la urgencia reglamentaria para ser sancionada en el menor tiempo posible. La parlamentaria aseguró que mañana jueves la Ley Habilitante ya estaría sancionada.

El oficialismo se ampara en el artículo 203 de la Constitución que establece "Son leyes habilitantes las sancionadas por la Asamblea Nacional por las 3/5 partes de sus integrantes, a fin de establecer las directrices, propósitos y marcos de las materias que se delegan al Presidente o Presidenta de la República con rango y valor de Ley. Las leyes habilitantes deben establecer el plazo de su ejercicio".

De igual forma, Flores desestimó los señalamientos que dicen que una ley habilitante no podría extenderse más allá del 5 de enero (fecha en la que inicia una nueva gestión de diputados), al decir: "Si es como señalan los sectores de la oposición burguesa, ninguna de las leyes aprobadas durante este tiempo tendrían vigencia para el año que viene, incluyendo la Ley de Presupuesto Fiscal para el 2011".

SORPRESA, SORPRESA

Las comisiones de la AN seguirán emitiendo proyectos de Ley durante el tiempo establecido de las sesiones extraordinarias. "Las leyes que vayan llegando las iremos incorporando a las sesiones", finalizó la presidenta del Parlamento. Al cierre de esta edición continuaba el debate de la Ley Habilitante y la propuesta de Iris Varela de extender su vigencia a 24 meses.



Chávez tendría los poderes plenos que le otorga la AN para legislar en diversas materias • RENIER OTTO/ARCHIVO

Figure 2: *Tal Cual* article, December 15, 2010.

Source: Online edition of *Tal Cual*.

in which Chávez is one with the 'excluded' (Zúquete 2014: 98–101) is also depicted, demonstrating how he is acting among the common people while still remaining above them.

Colours, clothing and national symbols also serve as signifiers in the pictures. Chávez used them systematically over a long period of time and in this way they came to support the connotations connected with the Chávez signifier. For example, he had worn a red beret since his first media appearance in the coup attempt of 1992. The red is a strong red and not a blended one like in Jaua's tie, signifying that he is determined and has a clear, strong vision

of 'socialism of the 21st century'. The Venezuelan flag is a symbol of nationalism but its meaning is contested since it represents different kinds of nationalism and unity for voters depending on whether they support the opposition or Chávez.

The symbols in the picture in *Tal Cual* are not as politically charged, but are still apparent, such as colours, clothing, and the habitus of the subjects. As seen in other studies (Salojärvi 2016; Salojärvi 2018), the opposition in Venezuela was trying to distinguish itself rhetorically from the Fourth Republic that had been in power for forty years before Chávez, and was often accused of being elitist. This

HENRIQUE CAPRILES DENUNCIÓ QUE EL EJECUTIVO LE DEBE A SU DESPACHO BS. 400 MILLONES

Lara y Miranda rechazan Habilitante

♦ Mandatarios regionales objetaron el paquetazo de leyes que pondría en riesgo la democracia del país

DANIEL PALACIOS YABARRA

"Desde Lara sentimos y sufrimos como Miranda". Con esta frase ayer Henri Falcón oficializó la entrega de 60 toneladas de alimentos, acopiados por su gobernación, para los damnificados de Miranda. Dichas provisiones fueron recibidas por su homólogo Henrique Capriles Radonski en la cancha deportiva Parque Miranda, en el municipio Sucre. Ambos mandatarios manifestaron su interés de establecer relaciones solidarias, para solventar las consecuencias de las recientes lluvias que han maltratado a la geografía mirandina.

El gobernador Capriles Radonski denunció que el Ejecutivo nacional debería a Miranda Bs. 400 millones. "Este martes enviamos un oficio solicitando Bs. 320 millones, pero si el Gobierno honrara su compromiso, no tendríamos que requerir recursos extraordinarios", dijo el gobernador mirandino, y precisó que dicha deuda correspondería a 2009 y 2010. Asimismo, manifestó que el Poder Legislativo nacional no es cónsono con la situación que vive Venezuela.

"Mientras estamos superando una emergencia, en este momento la Asamblea Nacional está aprobando una ley de medios de comunicación. ¿Qué tiene que ver una Ley Resorte con la emergencia de lluvias?", cuestionó el gobernador de Miranda.

Sobre este particular Henri Falcón considera que la Ley Habilitante "no



Henrique Capriles Radonski y Henri Falcón en un centro de acopio en Parque Miranda. HENRI OTTO/TALCUAL

tiene nada que ver con la resolución de crisis de algunas regiones. Eso es un parapeto que monta el Gobierno con la firme intención de desmontar gobernaciones y alcaldías. Se trata de un paquete de leyes que se le va a imponer al país para profundizar lo que hasta ahora no se conoce de la revolución y el socialismo".

El dirigente centrooccidental también fastidió el incremento al Impuesto al Valor Agregado (IVA). "El Gobierno tiene un gran desorden en sus finanzas. Si tuviera que hacerse una consideración sobre el IVA, pues debería fortalecerse la hacienda estatal, para que ese recurso IVA se quede en las regiones. Por eso, ¿cómo entender que un Gobierno va a au-

mentar los impuestos, cuando ha tenido los mejores ingresos petroleros?", discurrió el gobernador Falcón.

SOLIDARIDAD ENTRE REGIONES

Capriles Radonski reconoció que Henri Falcón haya hecho una pausa en su agenda para trasladarse a Caracas y concretar la donación de 60 toneladas de alimentos, que se transportaron en cinco camiones desde Lara, y que se sumarán a las 300 toneladas de comida y 120 mil litros de agua entregados, ofrecidos a los damnificados mirandinos, especialmente en Barlovento. Hasta la fecha el plan 'Arriba Miranda' ha registrado la inversión de Bs. 138 mil en 41 créditos, la entrega de 300 enseres y

12.195 personas atendidas en consultas médicas.

"Nos llamaron la atención las gráficas donde Henrique sale casi con el agua al cuello, y eso debe llamarnos a la reflexión a los que hacemos política. Es importante dejar a un lado el sectarismo para entender la necesidad de la gente. Reconozco y aplaudo la iniciativa del gobierno de Miranda. Lo que vemos en este centro de acopio es muestra de organización, desempeño y una muestra de solidaridad", dijo el gobernador Falcón en referencia al centro de provisiones de Parque Miranda.

"Que la Divina Pastora y Dios le premie tus acciones", dijo agradecido Capriles Radonski a su par larense.

Figure 3: *Tal Cual* article, December 16, 2010.

Source: Online edition of *Tal Cual*.

is also visible in the picture of Capriles since he is wearing casual clothing and accessories that cannot be linked to the wealthy elite. The opposition leader was attempting to contradict the image of himself that Chávez was trying to create. Moreover, the use of the cap became a symbol of

the anti-Chavistas since the Venezuelan flag cap was worn on many occasions. The cap also indicates that Capriles is a baseball fan, which may be considered a national sport in Venezuela. This makes him easier to approach. However, it may also emphasize that he is capable of leading the

country to a better future as baseball is a masculine sport, and masculinity is associated with certain dominant and active features.

When comparing the pictures of Chávez and Capriles, it becomes evident that Chávez is at one with the people. The people in the picture do not seem to be aware of the photographer(s), so in this way they are not performing and it seems more spontaneous, whereas Capriles and Falcon are clearly more aware of the photographer(s) in front of them and thus the picture seems more staged. This need not necessarily be the case, of course. Furthermore, the picture of Chávez shows everything that the people are looking at, unlike in the picture of Capriles and Falcon, which seems to imply that there is something else happening in the event, something that the reader cannot see, since the two politicians are gazing outside the frame. Hence, the picture of Chávez leaves nothing unsaid for the reader, makes the leader appear more approachable, and presents him as he really is.

Since it is uncommon to look directly into the camera in journalistic photographs, the closeness of the viewer and the participant, which is one of the factors in generating emotional appeal, has to be constructed by other means. In the picture of Chávez, this invitation to the viewer – addressing him/her – is achieved through the friendly, caring gaze between the woman and Chávez. Moreover, the people are standing close to Chávez, close enough to grab his arm. Close personal distance implies that there is an intimate relationship between the persons in close proximity (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 130), and hence the picture implies that there is an intimate, personal connection between the president and his people.

In comparison, in the picture of Capriles and Falcon, the two governors have their backs turned towards the people in the background. However, their bodies are in a frontal angle towards the camera, which implies that they are talking to the readers of *Tal Cual* and addressing them directly. Moreover, the picture is taken at eye level, which may be interpreted as indicating that the viewer is equal to them (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 146).

In the pictures of Flores and Jaua, gaze and camera angle both make a significant difference. In the picture in *Tal Cual*, both subjects are standing sideways at an oblique angle, duly distancing themselves from the viewer. In addition, Jaua is not looking at Flores but outside of the picture frame. There is no connection between them. In comparison, the image in *Correo del Orinoco* is taken in such a way that Jaua is almost at a frontal angle. He appears to be inviting viewers into the picture. Moreover, the gaze between Jaua and Flores makes the image more intense and dynamic.

In comparing the image-building of Chávez and other politicians, it is easy to detect the difference. Chávez is active and interacting with the people and his body language is revealing. He is a relaxed, caring but determined father figure, ready to listen to ordinary citizens and resolve their problems. This fatherliness² is underlined by the presence of a child. This was part of his image-building, which also included his television programme *Aló Presidente* which, at least initially, was designed to promote dialogue between

the president and the people, to which end it was reiterated how unusual it was for a president to interact with citizens to such a degree (Frajman 2014: 519). This underlines the uniqueness of Chávez as a president who actually listened to his people. Capriles and Falcon, instead, are barely interacting with each other and they are walking away from the crowd. Their casual clothing indicates that they are trying to diminish the gap between political leaders and ordinary people, but their actions serve to isolate them from the people. They are talking about the problems the people are facing and trying to help them, but are not among them like Chávez. Instead, the governors are showing a connection between themselves since they are walking side by side as a united front.

Conclusion

In this article, the focus has been on how populist elements are constructed and challenged in newspaper images of political leaders. This is important in order to understand the populist bond and appeal (cf. de la Torre 2017) and was achieved by selecting a case study where the emphasis is on the sense of constructing in-group cohesion from the government's perspective. By specifically focusing on Hugo Chávez's Venezuela, it is possible to analyse the role of journalistic photographs in a context where the whole society is permeated by populist politics (cf. Bisbal 2009) and it was found that the aspects that should be focused on are the process of constructing signifiers, and the populist leader as a signifier in contrast to other political actors.

By analysing the construction of signifiers, it is possible to reveal the complex interplay between different agents in the process. As a signifier, Chávez was constructed using many different techniques either by him (supporting signifiers such as colours and clothing), the media (camera angle and cropping) or the interplay of the political institution, media and/or citizens (personal distance, facial expressions, body language and rhetorical figures such as the crowd symbolizing the people of Chavismo) (cf. Aalberg and al. 2016). Strong political ties between the government and media institutions (e.g. Agencia Venezolana de Noticias, Presidential Press and *Correo del Orinoco*) enabled using many of the techniques. Here, it is possible to see the process of constructing a signifier since as it is characteristic to populism, it does not rely on prior myths but generates them through performativity and us/them dichotomy and it is this naming process that generates affective ties (Laclau 2005; see Palonen 2018).

In the case of a populist front man like Chávez, emotion is also generated by suggesting emotional transparency and consequently a perception of authenticity (Nahon Serfaty 2017) that highlights the special authentic connection between the leader and the people, thus, generating the sense of 'us'. This is done by including everything in the photo and depicting those photographed as 'not being aware' of the camera. In this way, a populist leader is created as a signifier detached from the elite and behind-the-scenes politics. Transparency represents truth and reality, and when creating a feeling of truthfulness it is

important to show representations that are non-traditional and to convey an impression of revealing everything and hiding nothing (cf. Nahon Serfaty 2017). This relationship with the people may be compared to the classic populism of Perón, where the leader and the people formed a unity (Arenas 2006). Moreover, being seen among the people but remaining above them is a characteristic of other Latin American populist leaders (de la Torre 2010), such as Argentina's Carlos Menem, who also resembled a religious leader in his style (Novaro and Palermo 1996: 207). In addition, similarities to Cuba's Fidel Castro may also be discerned, as he was constructed as an embodiment of the revolution and a paternal figure who had an affectionate relationship with his supporters (Moya Fábregas 2010).

In part, Chávez was in step with the regional change whereby a politician is mass-marketed using images, celebrity and personality, and took a step back from the party and other organizational structures (Boas 2010). Chávez's approach was exceptionally focused on the man himself (cf. Casullo 2018). Yet, his image was also constructed by setting him apart from other politicians, including other high-level government party politicians who seem less powerful, more passive and even dull in comparison, namely less significant and less appealing, which all contributed to creating a mythical figure out of Chávez as revealed by the comparative research design of the study. Capriles' and *Tal Cual's* approach was altogether more traditional and more matter of fact, reflecting not only the different editorial styles of the newspapers but also different political styles.

Visual images may add meaning or create it in a more unconscious way than written texts because they can be instrumental in influencing emotions. Therefore, an image is an easy way to deliver a message because many of our interpretations are made unconsciously (Schwarz and Clore 1988; cf. Schmuck and Matthes 2017: 4). Hence, an image may be a powerful tool for delivering a message since complex policy issues may be too daunting to assess, but everyone has the ability to judge another person's appearance and character, and her/his message in the process (Castells 2009: 202.) As a consequence, images may be a good way for populists to highlight their message since one facet of populism entails making people understand complex political phenomena (cf. Moffitt 2016: 142–145).

In both newspapers, the images highlighted the message conveyed in print. It is evident that small modifications may make a big difference in the way in which an image is perceived, as shown in the comparison of the pictures of Flores and Jaua. This pair of pictures also underlines the power that media professionals possess when it comes to making choices, and thus provides a glimpse of the tools media professionals had at their disposal in the daily struggle of practising their profession under increasing government control. The photographers were situated in the same area during the event, but media professionals were subsequently able to influence the way in which the visual images appeared in the newspapers, creating different kinds of connotations. Hence, political leaders may have the power to present themselves in a certain way,

but media professionals still have the power to choose the picture that best highlights their message.

Notes

¹ Available at www.correodelorinoco.gob.ve/category/edicion-impres/.

² Frajman (2014: 519, 523) points out that Chávez 'aimed to be simultaneously leader, father figure, friend, teacher, even sex symbol'.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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